

12-1993

Adoration of the Shepherds

La Salle University Art Museum

Caroline Wistar

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/exhibition_catalogues



Part of the [Fine Arts Commons](#), and the [History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

La Salle University Art Museum and Wistar, Caroline, "Adoration of the Shepherds" (1993). *Art Museum Exhibition Catalogues*. 40.
http://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/exhibition_catalogues/40

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the La Salle University Art Museum at La Salle University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Art Museum Exhibition Catalogues by an authorized administrator of La Salle University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact careyc@lasalle.edu.

And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. (Luke 2:16)

Beginning with this brief biblical account of the Adoration of the Shepherds, there was an expressive elaboration of the biblical event which developed over several hundred years, reaching such heights as the rich, visual re-enactment seen here in the Spadaro painting. The influences on artists' conceptions in that process were varied--medieval apocryphal writings about the Nativity, especially the thirteenth century *Golden Legend*; the medieval mystery plays; or the customs, tastes, and spiritual temper of the particular period in which the art was created. With regard to the last, Gertrud Schiller tells us that the concern to depict the Adoration of the Shepherds in art, especially the humility and poverty with which it was associated, was influenced by the Franciscan piety of the thirteenth century:

In the eyes of Francis of Assisi [the creator of the crèche], the poor men of the people were also the privileged ones, for it was they to whom the glad tidings were first announced, who first saw, adored, and loved the Child born in poverty. It was therefore in Italy that they were first painted, and here even before the middle of the fourteenth century, paintings representing the Adoration of the Shepherds were being executed.

However, during Early Christian and Medieval periods, it was usually the "Annunciation" to, rather than the "Adoration" of, the Shepherds which was portrayed in art and usually in a synoptic fashion, that is, together with other Nativity scenes (see *The Nativity* by Joos van Cleve in the Renaissance gallery). And generally speaking, it was not until the end of the fifteenth century that the Adoration of the Shepherds was treated as a single theme in Western art.

The development of the Shepherds' adoration was also influenced by the example of the Adoration of the Magi, depicted singly in Western art by the end

of the thirteenth century, though the Shepherds were given a quite different character. The Shepherds came to represent the homage of the poor and humble, and they offer rustic, pastoral gifts, while the Magi traditionally represent imperial dignity, wealth and splendor, and offer luxurious gifts. Like the Magi's gifts, those of the Shepherds were developed and given symbolic interpretations by medieval theologians. The Shepherds' gifts are symbolic of the roles Christ would play in the future: the bound lamb, symbol of His sacrifice; the crook, symbol of Him as Shepherd of souls; the musical pipes, symbol of His role as the "New Orpheus" with His following of disciples. Moreover, the Magi traditionally represent the manifestation of God in Christ to the Gentiles, while the Shepherds represent that same revelation to the Jews.

For further insight into the Adoration of the Shepherds, let us turn now to the individual examples in the Susan Dunleavy Collection so that we can better appreciate the significant role the artists' images played in revealing more abundantly man's faith in Christ.

Caroline Wistar
Curator

1. France, Paris (late 15th century)

Leaf from a Book of Hours

"Puer natus est..." (A Child is born to us...)

Manuscript illumination

Tempera on vellum with gold leaf

Purchased with funds donated by Col. & Mrs. David Souser

2. Studio of Geofroy Troy? (early 16th century), French

The Annunciation to the Shepherds

Printed text with hand illumination on vellum

3. Hendrik Goltzius (1558-1617), Dutch

The Adoration of the Shepherds 1549

iii/v (third state out of a total of five)

Engraving

After a painting by Jacopo Bassano

The late Renaissance image places the shepherds prominently in the center of the composition although the Annunciation is still viewed in the background. The dramatic contrast of heavenly and earthly light, the animation of the figures, and the complex spatial patterns point to the exuberant enactments of the Adoration so characteristic of much Baroque 17th century painting.

4. Rembrandt Harmenz van Rijn (1606-1669), Dutch

The Adoration of the Shepherds with the Lamp c. 1654

i/ii

Etching

Although this piece has a quieter, softer, and more simple enactment of the Adoration when compared to the other seventeenth century depiction in this exhibition, it is equally convincing in its evocation of the mystery, humility, and wonder associated with the event.

5. Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), German

"The Nativity" from *The Life of the Virgin* 1511

Woodcut (late 16th century impression)

In this Northern Renaissance image, the Shepherds' adoration is not yet prominent; only two can be seen entering the stable on the far right while the Annunciation is diminutively depicted in the right background. The classical ruin, upon which the stable has been built was frequently incorporated into Nativity scenes after 1420 to represent the fall of the pagan, classical age.

6. Andrea Scacciati, the younger (1725-1771), Italian (incid.)
After a painting by Palma Vecchio (inv. e del.)

Adoration of the Shepherds

Etching and aquatint

7. Domenico Gargiulo, called Micco Spadaro (1609/10-1675), Italian

Adoration of the Shepherds c. 1650-1655

Oil on canvas

This painting, related stylistically to La Salle's *Flight into Egypt* by Bourdon (in the seventeenth century gallery), presents a typically classical Baroque image with its emphasis on movement, gesture, and sharp contrasts of light and dark flickering over the surface, all set within a dynamic but balanced and serenely composed composition.

The Italianate, somewhat romanticized landscape of the background reflects the popularity of the pastoral tradition in the seventeenth century painting, especially the influence of Spadaro's colleague, Salvator Rosa. From the end of the fifteenth century on, artists expanded the numbers that came to adore the Child to include more than the three shepherds emphasized in the apocryphal literature. We see here the addition of a shepherd or peasant to the central group and two others who approach on the left, one of whom is clearly a shepherdess. By the seventeenth century, the Adoration theme in art often included two shepherdesses, "Alison and Mahaut," characters derived from the medieval mystery play, *Mystère de La Nativité*. The rustic gifts they offer are varied: a jug of milk, eggs, poultry, a lamb, fruit, or in this case, a cage of doves. The earthly, somewhat casual shepherd and shepherdess who climb the steps are still unaware of the dignity, reverence, and joy of the occasion that awaits them. Thus, the contrast between the activity on the left and the set postures of Adoration on the right heightens the drama of the event.

8. Aegidius Sadeler (?) (c. 1570-1629), Flemish
After Hans van Aachen (1551-1615), German
The Nativity
Pen and brown ink (squared for transfer)
Preparatory design for the print
9. Engraved by Aegidius Sadeler (?) (c. 1570-1629), Flemish (sc.)
After a painting by Hans van Aachen (inv.)
The Nativity 1588
Engraving
Note the inclusion of the shepherdess at the lower center foreground
10. Aegidius Sadeler (?) (c. 1570-1629), Flemish
After a painting by Hans van Aachen
The Nativity
Sanguine
Preparatory design for the print
11. Jan Sadeler (c. 1550-1600), Flemish
After a painting by Polidoro da Caravaggio
Adoration of the Shepherds
Engraving
Purchased with funds donated by the Art Angels
According to Jeremy Wood, the gathering of the cloth by the Virgin to reveal the Christ child alludes to the priest uncovering the Eucharist during the celebration of the Mass.



